

COMMENTS ON MYERS' *HUMAN PERSONALITY* ON THE OCCASION OF ITS REPRINTING¹

By W. H. SALTER

THE FIRST systematic attempt at a complete exploration of human personality was launched in 1872 when Henry Sidgwick and Frederic Myers formed "a sort of informal association . . . with a common fund" in order to promote the objective study of those faculties and states which had been neglected by the older sciences, and to co-ordinate their discoveries with those of workers in other scientific fields. They were joined a few years later by Edmund Gurney, and these three, with other friends sharing their interests, formed the nucleus of the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882. By the end of the century it was already desirable that knowledge of the progress made in this novel venture should no longer be confined to readers of the Society's *Journal* and *Proceedings* but should be put before the public in a comprehensive survey.

Myers was obviously the man to do this. No one had longer practical experience over the whole field of psychical research. His familiarity with contemporary work in adjacent fields, particularly in medical psychology, was exceptional. He had a remarkable gift of expounding a complex case with lucidity and eloquence. Writing at Myers' death of the work published during his lifetime, William James said: "Through him for the first time psychologists are in possession of their full material, and mental phenomena are set down in an adequate inventory."²

But such an inventory, however full, however well arranged, did not wholly satisfy the needs either of the time or of Myers' temperament. "Solid passionate determination" in putting "the final question to the Universe," to quote a letter of Sidgwick's, had inspired all the founders of psychical research, but in Myers it was raised to white heat. Would the inquiry that Sidgwick, he, and Gurney had started fade out when not only *they* were all dead, but when such colleagues

¹ By Longmans Green and Co., in cooperation with Garrett Publications, May, 1954.

² *Proc. Soc. psych. Res.*, Vol. 17, p. 16.

as Mrs. Sidgwick and Oliver Lodge, William James, and Richard Hodgson, in whose hands the immediate future of psychical research was assured, were no longer able to promote it? There was not at Myers' death any large body of students who had specialized in psychical research, and for whom a text book of the ordinary kind would have sufficed. It was necessary to impress on as wide a section as possible of the educated public a sense of importance of an inquiry unlikely for many years to win a footing in the Universities or endowment on a large scale. Had *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* been nothing more than a text book, it would long ago have gone the way of most text books. It would not fifty years after publication have been re-issued by the Parapsychology Foundation with all the advantages accruing from an Introduction by Professor Gardner Murphy.

The book consists mainly of closely reasoned argument backed by copious evidence, but there are frequent literary quotations and allusions, and here and there, as in the Epilogue, the tone is frankly emotional. This has been the occasion for criticism which I regard as misdirected. Every psychical researcher is bound in the course of his studies to come across much that is distasteful—phenomena produced by unconscious deception or deliberate fraud, the uncritical acceptance of poor evidence, wishful subjectivity in interpreting facts. Even when his subject-matter is free from these defects, he will often be painfully aware of the triviality or tediousness of many of the details and of the incompleteness of any picture to be formed of it as a whole. He may be tempted to abandon his inquiry in disgust if he fails to remember that, though his methods may be modern, the problems he is attempting to solve have exercised the wonder and thought of mankind throughout all history. It may help him to be reminded of what the poets and saints and sages have said, not only for the beauty of their language, but because they speak out of their own experience of the hidden processes of thought and feeling. Even, however, at a time when knowledge of the classics was more widely spread than now, Myers was trying his readers rather high in prefacing his second chapter with a dictum from Heraclitus, an author who specialized in obscurity, and leaving them for more than sixty pages with no help in the text to understand it.

Myers did not live to complete his book. As his friend Sir Lawrence Jones, whose recent death we deplore, told us in his Presidential Address to the S.P.R.,³ Myers assured him in December, 1900, that he would live until February, 1902, and that he intended to complete each month one of the twelve parts into which the book was to be divided. His assurance was based on the prediction of a medium in whom he placed special confidence, but in fact he had less than a month of life before him. For lack of final revision the book as published two years later showed serious inconsistencies in the argument, or "exposition" as he preferred to call it, which not even the editorial skill of Richard Hodgson and Alice Johnson could entirely rectify. There were also gaps which they had to fill as best they could by piecing together passages written by him at various times.

The general scheme of the book was to start with occurrences which did not require recourse to causes unrecognized by general scientific opinion, as illustrated in Chapters II ("Disintegrations of Personality"), III ("Genius") and IV ("Sleep"). From these he passed to the consideration of faculties of living persons, unrecognized by science, but, as he urged, established by sufficient evidence; such, for example, as extrasensory perception, to use the modern term. He concluded with discussing the evidence for the survival of bodily death.

He prepares the ground for the conception of a man's continued activity after the death of his body by showing that during the life of the body the man was capable of various activities not conditioned by his physical organism. Myers, as Professor Gardner Murphy reminds us, was well abreast of the psychological thought of his time, as is shown by his references to the work of Breuer and Freud at a time when they were almost unknown in the English-speaking world. His opinions therefore as to the structure of personality could not at the time he expressed them be lightly dismissed as based on superficial knowledge, and there was at that time a good deal to be said for his argument that multiple personalities connected with one body, but having different streams of memory and conflicting temperaments, were evidence for mental activity independent of bodily

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 38, p. 43.

conditions. If this proposition were accepted, a step seemed gained towards the acceptance of discarnate mental activity.

But the argument was a two-edged weapon. If the shocks of life in the body had such a disruptive effect on personality, what prospect was there that the shock of bodily death would leave any minute fraction of it recognizable? At several points in his book Myers is obviously embarrassed by this ambivalence, as for example in the opening of Chapter VI on Sensory Automatism. "Our view of the subliminal self must pass in this chapter through a profound transition. The glimpses which we have till now obtained of it have shown it as something incidental, subordinate, fragmentary. But henceforth it will gradually assume the character of something persistent, principal, unitary. . . ."

This is one of the passages Lord Balfour cites in criticizing the inconsistencies of Myers' theory.⁴ Had he lived to complete the book, Myers would presumably have done something to smooth them out, giving, I think, more prominence to the "unitary" and less to the "fragmentary" view. If, as we are now told, secondary personalities are no more than moods, the force of the argument for survival developed in Chapter II is impaired, but his main argument is strengthened by being set free from an ambiguous conception of the subliminal.

In the middle portion of the book Myers passes to the paranormal faculties of the living. He accepted the genuineness of "physical phenomena" more unreservedly than most of his colleagues, but it is his view of the "mental phenomena" that is of cardinal importance to his whole teaching. What we now call ESP he divides into telepathy and "telaesthesia." For telepathy he retains the traditional definition of "the communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognized channels of sense," adding that it might exist "between one man still living on earth and another long since departed." These terms, which suggest nothing more complex than one-way transmission between a single agent and single percipient, would be adequate for the early experiments in thought transference, or at any rate for the view taken of them before the question of precognitive clairvoyance had been raised. As early, however, as the publication in 1886 of *Phantasms*

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 43, pp. 263-83.

of *the Living* both Gurney and Myers found it difficult to fit some of the cases they were analyzing, particularly the cases of collective percipience, into so narrow a conception.

But if, as Myers suggests, telepathy is to include communications from the departed, a still more complex conception is required, one for which the traditional definition is inappropriate and misleading. This is particularly true of those developments of automatic writing which began soon after his death and claimed to have been initiated by his surviving personality. For the cross-correspondences, the importance of which Professor Gardner Murphy emphasizes, it is necessary to postulate a far-reaching, long-continued interpenetration of minds, of living minds certainly, and, in the view of the eminent psychical researchers who elucidated them, of discarnate minds as well.

In his Chapter on Genius, and again in the Epilogue, Myers eloquently expounds his conception of telepathy, saying (Chapter X): "Love is a kind of exalted but unspecialized telepathy;—the simplest and most universal expression of that mental gravitation or kinship of spirits which is the foundation of the telepathic law." These passages should be compared with the short poem printed (p. 148) in the posthumous *Fragments of Prose and Poetry*, and the conclusion (p. 53) of the autobiographical section of that book. From these it is made very clear that, although as he said in Chapter III, "the flesh does not conjoin, but dis sever," complete spiritual unity is possible in this life, and that he did not regard the "mutual gravitation of spirits" as precluding "a personal, an unbounded, an endless career of life and joy."

Such were Myers' aspirations, which he presumably considered consistent with the evidence before him, though it is not easy to imagine any kind of evidence which would go further than leave room for such a conception. The evidence which he adduces is much more modest in scope, and, even as evidence for the continued personal survival of those who have recently departed this life, is disappointing in quantity and, for the most part, in quality too. The best of it comes from the early stages of Mrs. Piper's mediumship, but, as Sir Lawrence Jones pointed out,⁵ Richard Hodgson and Alice Johnson "had to print the unfinished book with the lamentable

⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 38, p. 44.

omission of most of the evidence on which Myers had based his enthusiastic belief in Survival," evidence, that is, which Myers had himself received.

It is at the present time merely of historical interest to speculate how this gap might have been filled, because much more evidence of good quality bearing on the problem of survival has accrued since Myers' death than any he had before him. Much of the new material claims to have been inspired by Myers; but, as Professor Gardner Murphy observes, "The problem of evidence for survival has proved to be far more complex than it seemed in Myers' day." A great deal of it seems to me to favor the idea of interpersonal existence, which Professor Gardner Murphy has developed elsewhere, and to leave as one of the urgent problems for future research the question whether, and how, interpersonal existence can be regarded as capable of the initiative and design, to which the same evidence also points, matters that we are accustomed to consider distinctive of personality.

Myers' book cannot now be regarded as the last word in either fact or theory. He would not have wished it to be that, and his intention was clearly as much prophetic as expository, to stimulate research which, as every pioneer knows, seldom proceeds on the exact lines on which it starts. But much more than a historical interest attaches to the book. Many of the conceptions which Myers had to consider in the context of his day are likely to re-emerge now and in the future, though in a different context. A modern researcher is sure to profit if, before his ideas crystallize, he will read up what Myers has to say on the subject. Nor will it hurt him to be reminded how wide is the field which his study must cover, how solid and passionate must be his determination if he hopes "to put the final question to the Universe."

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